

Note by the British Embassy in Paris on French policy towards WEU (19 February 1969)

Caption: On 19 February 1969, Leslie Fielding, a British diplomat at the United Kingdom's Embassy in Paris, sends a note to the Foreign Office in London giving details of a conversation with Luc de Nanteuil, Deputy Director for Middle East Affairs at the French Foreign Ministry, regarding France's policy towards Western European Union (WEU), especially concerning Middle East issues. The note throws an interesting light on the development of the French attitude over the recent WEU meeting in London on 14 February.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Eastern Department and successors: Registered Files (E and NE Series). MIDDLE EAST. Discussions. Western European Union (WEU) ministerial meeting. 01/01/1969-31/12/1969, FCO 17/727 (Former Reference Dep: NE 2/29).

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French Policy towards W.E.U.

I enclose a copy of a minute by Leslie Fielding recording a conversation on 17 February with Luc de Nanteuil, the Deputy Director for Middle East Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay. I think you will agree that this throws an interesting light on the development of the French attitude over the recent W.E.U. meetings.

2. As regards the passage about relations between Couve and Debré, it is, of course, common knowledge that the two men are rivals who frequently disagree and are temperamentally opposed to one another. It seems very likely, therefore, that Couve played the part attributed to him by Nanteuil.

3. As for Debré's own position and his views on foreign policy, we have recently learned that at a meeting attended by some fifty senior Quai d'Orsay officials early in the new year, Debré made a speech in the course of which he referred to the cynicism of the Russians and also said that in the course of this year "the English problem must be resolved". This latter point might account for Nanteuil's hint as recorded at the end of Fielding's record.

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French Policy towards W.E.U.

I am recording below a conversation which I had yesterday with M. Luc de Nanteuil, the Deputy Director for Middle East Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay, which suggests that the division of opinion which had formerly obtained within the French Government in regard to the Middle East may now to some extent be extended to European affairs.

2. As we know, there has been a distinct cleavage between the French President and his Foreign Minister about how to handle the Soviet Memorandum on the Middle East. Our principal source of information on this has been Nanteuil whom I happen to know well socially. Nanteuil has been for several years an unrewarding and even a relatively ill-disposed and prickly contact of this Chancery who suddenly sprang into animation a month or two ago. He is a complex personality, but the immediate twin stimuli which appear to have galvanised him are first a certain esteem for Israel and second the sentiment that to lend whole-hearted support to current Gaullist policy in the Middle East would be to dishonour his (ancient and distinguished) family escutcheon.

3. Nanteuil summoned me to the Quai d'Orsay à titre personnel on 18 February to enquire, as he put it, whether our rôle in the current crisis in W.E.U. was dictated on our part exclusively by considerations of European policy or whether there was not also in it an element of concern for the Middle East situation. I agreed that we had all along genuinely desired an exchange of views with our European partners on the substance of the Middle East as a prelude to the consultations shortly to take place in New York à quatre between the Great Powers. This had been made perfectly clear to Nanteuil as long ago as 24 January at the Anglo/French talks in London on the Middle East. Since M. de Lipkowski had taken the initiative at Luxembourg to stimulate ministerial discussion then and there, it had seemed to us natural to continue discussion in the framework of the Council, this time in greater detail at the level of Permanent Representatives.

4. Nanteuil said he accepted this explanation and that he, for his part, deplored the row which the French Government had stirred up over the Council's meeting in London last Friday. As he explained to Arthur in London last month, he and Lebel had been much worried that, if the Secretary of State were to link British acceptance of the French proposal for four power consultations with an initiative au préalable by him (Stewart) with European Ambassadors, this might anger General de Gaulle and imperil the future prospects for close consultation between the F.C.O. and the Quai d'Orsay on the Middle East, to which, as I knew, Nanteuil attached great importance. On his return to Paris, therefore, Nanteuil and Lebel had proposed to Ministers that the tactful course would be for Britain and France both to take the initiative to "transfer the proposed discussion from Mr. Stewart's office to the Permanent Council of W.E.U.". The idea had been that routine discussion à sept in the W.E.U. Council could be passed off as a normal event and the General be persuaded that there was no intention on the part of H.M.G. to steal any French thunder. This idea had been considered not unfavourably by M. Debré but not pursued because of his (Debré's) delicate position vis-à-vis both General de Gaulle and M. Couve de Murville in relation to Middle East policy. The

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chickens had subsequently come home to roost after the Luxembourg ministerial meeting when the French Government had had to consider what position they should adopt towards the proposed meeting of the W.E.U. Permanent Council. Given the fact that the Middle East had by then already been discussed at ministerial level, M. Debré had not been very enthusiastic that it should be pursued at working level; but the key personality in determining the very tough line taken by the French Government had been the French Prime Minister. According to Nanteuil, Couve de Murville had intervened powerfully with General de Gaulle, partly because he (Couve) was as bitterly opposed as ever to anything which could bring Britain closer towards entry into the European Community, but also because Couve suspected that Debré was being "soft", both towards us (see below) and over the Arab/Israel dispute, and saw this as an opportunity to go behind the back of his colleague "pour lui casser les pattes"

5. Nanteuil then went on to repeat, what as it happens he had urged on me last month, that M. Debré was not implacably opposed to British entry into Europe as had been his predecessor. Debré was, in fact, in two minds: on the one hand, his instinct drove him to wish to collaborate more closely with us; on the other hand he was afraid to stick his neck out too far, both because of the difficulty of his own domestic political position in the après Gaullisme line-up and because he was suspicious of the present British Government and looked more to the Conservative Administration which he thought would be in power in London before very long. Debré's inclination to work more closely with us showed most clearly over the Middle East; but there might also be something in the wind as regards Europe. Nanteuil would not be specific, claiming only that his close acquaintance with the Minister and his own political contacts persuaded him that something was afoot. He would say only that we British should do more to make it easier for Debré to ménager le Général.

Leslie Fielding

18 February, 1969.

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